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On Writing

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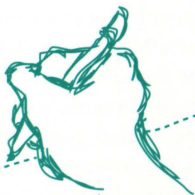
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ON WRITING

Justin Oldenhuis



I WROTE THIS PIECE THE DAY BEFORE
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I wrote this piece the day before the deadline. I knew about it for months. I knew my topic, I read books, wrote notes, used a green highlighter. I discussed it and thought about it to great length. For weeks and weeks, I continued to put off the act of writing it for other activities, some more important than others. "Crunch time" approached and I drafted a schedule for myself. Unsurprisingly, it was not adhered to, pushed aside so that I could stand in my backyard and have a drink while playing with fire on a beautiful spring evening. Yet, it loomed in the back of my mind, poking and prodding, much as I stoked the flames, waiting to be released.

I would like to refer to a passage from Robert Grudin's *The Grace of Great Things* where he eloquently describes a bout of writer's block in an attempt to explain how I feel when I write.

"Yesterday I sat at my desk and could not write. I fidgeted, typed a few aimless words onto the computer screen, and stared at them until they began to shimmer. My back ached. I glanced at the clock and noticed that two hours had passed, as though in two minutes, except I suddenly felt old and very tired. I walked out of the office and looked for someone to chat with.

"When I got back, things were no better. The office looked stricken and skewed, like architecture photographed at the moment of collapse...To top it off, I noticed for the first time that every horizontal surface in the office—computer, clock, fan, radio, typewriter, telephone—was encrusted with blackening grime, and that this grime was defacing my office as obscenely as my own inactivity was defacing my brain. I got up again, found a bottle of

Windex, and worked like a demon, rubbing away at a pint of dissolving filth.

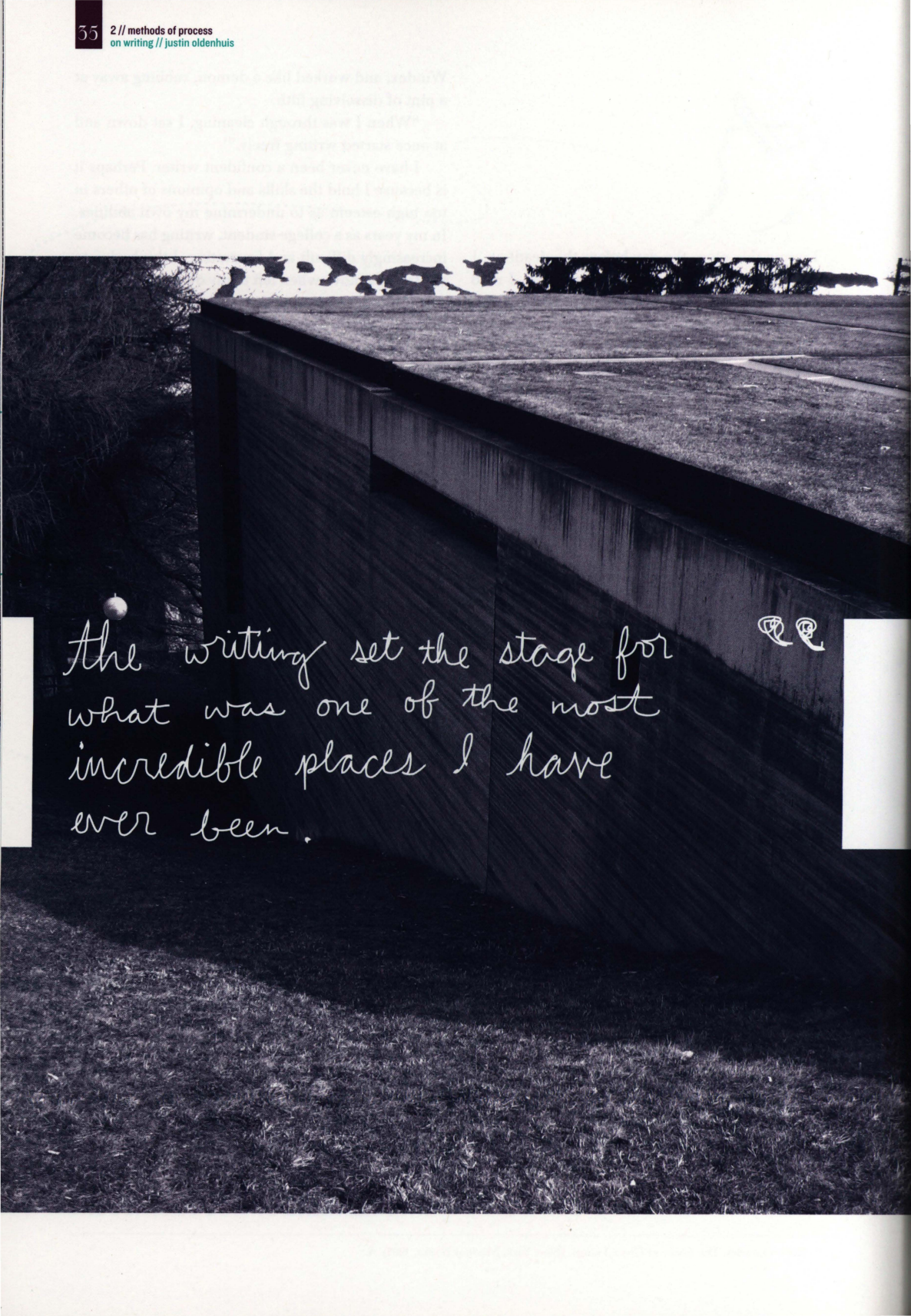
"When I was through cleaning, I sat down and at once started writing freely."¹

I have never been a confident writer. Perhaps it is because I hold the skills and opinions of others in too high esteem as to undermine my own abilities. In my years as a college student, writing has become increasingly difficult and frustrating, I think, due to the fact that now, when left to my own devices, I feel the desire to write about things that are personal and hold a great deal of importance to me. Exposing these emotional and/or personal fragments about my work, my methods, and my interests to a critical audience, can be both intimidating and debilitating. For a while, I believed that I hated writing.

Not until recently—within the last year and a half—have I come to realize how integral writing is to my work. Looking back on a few of my sketchbooks, new and old, I noticed that they are almost half writing, half drawing. Upon reading the passage in Robert Grudin's book, I began to view the importance of writing in my life much differently. The design process is full of figurative "road blocks" much like the one Grudin was faced with. These unbearable situations in which we are forcing ourselves to think creatively at times when we are strained and distracted are all too common. In much the same way that Grudin cleans—therapeutically—I have tried to use writing to overcome obstacles in designing during my projects, whether that is through writing an essay or just notes in a sketchbook.

Writing allows us to reflect. It is at those "road blocks" or points of chaos that we need to be critical of ourselves and ask "Why am I doing this?" Through the act of writing, we can free the thoughts that slow us down, figure out the things we do not understand, and solidify the reasoning behind what we are doing. For, if we cannot explain our work clearly and passionately, we cannot expect our audience to take it seriously.

¹Robert Grudin, *The Grace of Great Things*. (New York, Mariner Books, 1991), 4.



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Through writing I began to learn more about myself and how I work. I do not think it was until my fourth year of school when I began to understand my true beliefs about architecture. Attempting to write about my work showed me that my beliefs concerning design are increasingly moral, ethical, and experiential and much less about what is “cool” or trendy. Perhaps this is just a result of my own maturation as a designer but it was something revealed to me through the act of writing. Over time I have amassed pages upon pages of notes, ideas, fragments, and short essays in an attempt to articulate my design concepts and thoughts. In much the same way one cleans their desk to keep a sense of order, I write to keep myself in order, to clear my head of the ‘fluff’. A change occurs in the transcription of thoughts and ideas to a physical medium, and usually relates directly to a particular thought or idea but at once has a more concrete and moving effect. It is pen on paper.

Aside from dealing with my insecurities, reading how others write has been the most crucial part of the improvement in my writing. To be a good writer, one must be a good reader. The design culture relies heavily on all of its participants being aware of what each other is doing and thinking. In some way, everyone serves as and searches for sources of influence and inspiration. Over the past year, I have read various writings by Peter Zumthor, Juhani Pallasmaa, Lewis Hyde, Michael Benedikt, Robert Grudin, etc... all of which have inspired me to better my own writing. These pieces have encouraged me to reflect and ask myself, “What am I doing? Why am

I doing this? What do I believe in?” These kinds of dilemmas are addressed through writing in many of their works, things we cannot necessarily see or understand in their architecture (particularly in the case of Zumthor).

I made it a point to read Zumthor’s *Atmospheres* before I went to visit the Therme Vals in Switzerland – an architectural pilgrimage, if you will. The writing set the stage for what was one of the most incredible places I have ever been. The building itself was beautiful but it was the people, the light, sounds, smells; the myriad of both tangible and intangible elements that made it incredible architecture. This is evident in the stones of the building. Both conceptually and physically, the structure is held in place by the stones quarried from the same mountain on which it sits. As bread goes with butter, Zumthor’s writing forms a symbiotic relationship with his architecture.

**“AS WE WRITE, SO WE BUILD:
TO KEEP A RECORD OF WHAT
MATTERS TO US.”**

— ALAIN DE BOTTON²

This is the essence of writing. It brings order, allows us to reflect, and enlightens us. I continually try to view writing not as a hurdle but as a parallel development to my design projects, serving to make them more than they are visually by revealing the things I care about; the things that make architecture so extraordinary. ▲



²Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 125.